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ABSTRACT

An instructor had an experience in which both she and a student grew by taking risks. In the process of evaluating English compositions, the instructor found a student's paper that lacked the mechanics of writing but showed creativity and maturity. Working closely with this student the instructor discovered how quickly he learned. Although they had a good working relationship, the student, who was a minority, was distrustful of what the instructor represented. During a confrontation concerning a composition, the student shared many personal feelings and doubts. The central issue was that the instructor would not let the student quit. The instructor decided to write a poem about the student and share it with him. By doing this she felt that she was taking a risk by relating personally to the student just as he had risked the loss of autonomy in her office. The student was grateful, not so much for the poem, but for the instructor's reaching out to him. The instructor felt that this rare kind of interaction crystallized for her why she had remained an educator and reminded her of the risk that accompanies that choice. (EM)

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CHOOSING TO RISK

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CHOOSING TO RISK

Most of us who have chosen to remain educators have done so because the desire to serve students, to support them, to shape their behavior overwhelms any negative realities of the teaching experience. As educators, we have learned that students can succeed in spite of our sometimes mistaken and experimental notions about content and instruction, in spite of our inconsistent relations with both students and subject, and in spite of our human foibles and frailties. While we stay in teaching because we have chosen to serve, part of our staying is selfish, motivated by thoughts of that heady reward we occasionally experience when our efforts appear to make dramatic differences in students. I have had a few such moments in my years. Each of them served to renew my faith in myself as an educator and as a person and in my usually firm faith in my students. The most recent of these rare moments was only months ago.

In the process of evaluating English composition assessment essays, I found one particular paper that appeared to warrant a low score; but I chose to seek another opinion before deciding that the student should enroll in developmental rather than in introductory English. One of my colleagues said that she saw potential in the essay that I perhaps overlooked; respecting her opinion, I moved the student into a general composition course.

My contact with that student was immediate, for I followed a conference format in the class, meeting with each student each day. As I examined some of the first draft material with him, I was discouraged by the flaws in basic mechanics. As I read more carefully, however, I became aware that his organization was sound, that his syntax was unusual--almost poetic, and that his insights were those of a mature, intelligent adult. After commenting on the strong aspects of his writing, I briefly instructed him in the rudiments of using commas and constructing possessives.

When we met the following day to examine his revised draft, he began the session. *He briefed me!* He opened his notebook to the rough draft, summarized my comments (I had written nothing), pointed to his punctuation errors and their between-line corrections, and then led me through a new draft. I noticed immediately that he had repeated none of the first-draft mistakes in punctuation. This pattern remained consistent throughout the term; as I pointed out an error and explained how to correct it, he looked, listened intently, and never repeated the misuse. I was giddy with my success, telling colleagues that I had never had a student learn so quickly or retain instruction so completely.

In spite of our good working relationship, always conducted on neutral ground and over comparatively innocuous issues, he remained wary, distrustful not so much of me but of what I represented. He was a minority, and his best writing dealt with minority issues. I was prompted to ask him to share more about his culture after examining a final draft--an analysis of the impact of his grandfather's death. He had analyzed the loss of a way of life. In parts of the essay, his description of his grandfather was a boy's poetic lament over the loss of a hero; in other parts, there was a grown man's statement of love for one who had left a legacy rich in tradition. We commented about the consistently high grades that he was receiving.

The next morning he arrived late for his conference, reeking of liquor. For three days this was the situation, and my dismay turned to helplessness. I did not know what to do. But then he solved my immediate dilemma--he stopped coming to the conferences.

I took no action for a week; instead I conducted fragmented dialogues with my alter ego: Easier this way, right? But to lose the chance to work with that raw talent! Should I confront his drinking? If drinking is a problem with him, my comments would be only naive platitudes. Do I really know that he's doing his own work?--the progress is remarkable--maybe too remarkable? But where is my faith? And most significantly, I asked myself, "Do I have the right to interfere in this person's life, to know I am indirectly altering his world view?" My response was deliberate. Maybe I didn't have the right to interfere (I still am not sure), but I decided to do it anyway. Securing his phone number from registration materials, I called him. At first doubtful about my identity, he began to express pleasure over my calling, saying no one had ever before been interested enough to do something like that. I told him as simply as I could that I missed him and that I wanted him back in conference. When I insisted on establishing a time for the next day, he slowly and cautiously agreed.

And he came. We dealt first with how he could catch up. He was anxious, but I assured him he could complete the assignment sheet even though it would demand considerable effort. As he left, he paused and



said quietly, "The call did it. If you hadn't called, I wouldn't have come back." So simple, our expressions of concern. One phone call.

My heart sank as I read his paper the following day. Structurally, it was a nearly perfect analysis of Picasso's artistic stages. I believed I was reading something copied from a book, and I didn't know what to say. He broke the silence: "What's wrong?" I acknowledged the writing's technical superiority and questioned the professional knowledge of art that hung on every sentence. "It sounds like a report," I blurted. He froze. "You think I copied it." "No," I said, "but . . ." Those two words and the long silence galvanized him. He tore the paper from my hands, his jaw muscles taut, his hands trembling. "I'm an artist!" He nearly hissed the words at me. "I've studied this man for six years. I do this!" He paused, and the anger ebbed. "I'll do another one. You're just like everyone else." Tentatively, painstakingly, both under stress and feeling threatened, we reached consensus: He would recast the paper, concentrating on altering the tone for an envisioned lay audience.

He returned the next day, drunk. His speech was slurred. Although the revised paper looked as if it had been produced by someone under the influence of alcohol, the content was excellent. Repeatedly, he struck the pages with his forefinger as he showed me his changes. I read slowly and carefully, wondering how best to defuse the situation. Sensing serious confrontation, students who were waiting for conferences quietly left the room until only the two of us remained. He jerked his notebook open to his journal section and shoved it in front of me. "You look," he demanded. (I had assured students that I would document but not read their private entries.) "This at first is junk." His words slurred. "Now read. It gets better." I was shocked. Sheer poetry spun across those pages--observations of nature, of man, interpretations as sensitive and intuitively correct as a seer's. His statement of love for his wife, written after a stormy argument, is one of the most mature, gentle statements of the love of a man for a woman I have ever read. "You did this," he interrupted my fascinated reading. "You let me go. You let me learn. You taught me. But I'm done. This is all." He rose to leave.

Somehow, we crossed the hallway to my office and spent the next two hours in a surrealistic, serious, exhausting, tension-filled confrontation. Powerful because of understatement, his words spilled out about being a minority, about his art, his goals, his failures, his past confrontations, his repeated confirmations that the majority culture views him as dispensable, almost non-existent now. Repeatedly we returned to the central issue: He chose not to finish; I insisted he had to, that I would not let him go. After a long pause, he exorcised the controlling ghost: "But I've never finished anything like this in my life," he whispered.

It is the stuff of golden tales to recount the concluding days of the class, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that those days lacked tension. He came to all sessions, and he completed all assignments. In scheduled out-of-class meetings, he brought selected art works to show me, eagerly explaining them. They were stunning--haunting faces, impelling abstracts, charcoals, pastels. I understood his earlier statement, "I am an artist." The line and life in his work captured me; and I tried to absorb the images as he talked of his past training in the Southwest and his plans to enroll in a coastal art institute in the fall.

Toward the end of the term, I was suddenly struck by the dichotomy of our positions and actions. He had risked loss of autonomy by letting me learn of him, whereas I had acted from the power of my position. I resolved to risk in turn, knowing I truly would not have leveled with this fellow adult until I had. I chose to do something that is extremely high risk for me. For four days, after as many days of thinking and planning, I worked on a poem for him. I labored hard on that poem, working to capture in it my assessment of his underlying artistic talent; acknowledging his role, sometimes his plight, as a minority; speaking to the future he can create for himself; thanking him for self-disclosing. As I handed the poem to him, my ghosts and frailties surfaced in my disclaimers. Only one other person has ever read poetry that I've written; this was indeed a risk for me. He nodded his understanding. His facial expression after he read the poem is etched in my memory. It radiated thanks, not so much for the poem as for the act of reaching out, for risking by sharing.

I will probably never see this student again. We are now thousands of miles apart. But I will retain the memory of this encounter--an event during which I became the student as he began a new learning process, during which the two of us related as equals, during which we struggled against and then with each other to grow beyond what we were. This kind of rare interaction crystallizes for me why I have remained an educator and reminds me of the risk that accompanies that choice.

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